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ABSTRACT

A survey of 88 research libraries measuring staff involvement in key public service functions indicates that professional personnel are significantly more active in providing graduate library instruction, online searches, and reference service than paraprofessionals. When professional groups were compared, it was found that in those libraries employing both subject specialists and generalist reference librarians, the generalists were more responsible for online searching and reference selection and were only slightly less responsible than subject specialists in providing graduate library instruction. A copy of the questionnaire is included. (Author/RAA)

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CHARACTERISTICS OF PUBLIC SERVICE STAFFING AT ARL LIBRARIES

by

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CHARACTERISTICS OF PUBLIC SERVICE STAFFING AT ARL LIBRARIES

In an effort to determine who is providing basic public services at ARL libraries, a questionnaire was sent in April, 1981, to the 99 academic libraries listed in ARL Statistics 1979-80. The questionnaire was addressed to the Head of each Reference Department and solicited staffing information in four areas: online searching, library instruction, book selection, and reference service. The intent of the questionnaire was to provide comparative staffing information to library administrators on how other large research libraries allocated staff resources. With comparative data, administrators could decide whether staffing patterns at their library were typical or atypical, and if atypical, evaluate the possibility of staffing changes. A secondary objective of this study was to determine the relative use of paraprofessionals in relationship to the professional staff, and within the professional staff, the relative use of Generalist Reference Librarians vis a vis Subject Specialists.

QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN AND SAMPLE SIZE

The questionnaire had 12 questions, two of which pertained to staffing intensity, 1 to the educational background of paraprofessionals, 1 to the withdrawal of Subject Specialists from the reference desk, 5 to the relative contributions of library staff in the aforementioned public service tasks, and 3 to the appropriate number of hours staff should serve on the reference desk. 5 of the questions required respondents to weight, from 5 (heighest) to 1 (lowest), the relative importance of staffing groups in the provision of

specific public services. To ensure that each respondent was working with the same definitions of "Generalist Reference Librarian," "Subject Specialist Librarian," and other staff groups, uniform definitions were given in a prefatory note. In this same note, respondents were asked to base their staff assessments only on personnel in the Main Library. This proviso was thought necessary, since branch staff often establish policies different from the Main Library as well as from each other. Respondents who worked in a library with both Information and Reference Desks were asked to provide data only on the Reference Desk.

88 out of 99 libraries returned the questionnaire from May through July, 1981. Given the large number of responses, the data is felt to be highly reliable, with one important caveat: it reflects the judgment of Head Reference Librarians, and different answers might have been given if the Collection Development Officer or Library Instruction Coordinator had filled out the questionnaire.

LIBRARY INSTRUCTION

As to who is providing most library instruction, both at the undergraduate and graduate level, only graduate data is reliable, due to some flaws in the undergraduate question. Since many ARL libraries have undergraduate libraries, and respondents were asked to limit their staff assessments to the Main Library, the undergraduate count was not accurately measured. Moreover, the category of "paraprofessional" was inadvertently dropped from the undergraduate question, which also skewed results in favor of professionals.

On the graduate level, Subject Specialists are clearly most active in library instruction. 57.95% of the libraries gave the heighest weight to Subject Specialists, 42.04% to Generalists, and 1.12% to the Library Instruction Librarian.[1] However, in the 67 libraries having both Subject Specialists

and Generalists, Generalist responsibility increases to 44.78% and Subject Specialist decreases to 50.75% (with 2.98% of the libraries rating them equally). In only 10.23% of the libraries did paraprofessionals have a role in graduate instruction.

ONLINE SEARCHING

Online searching responsibility is split almost evenly between Subject Specialists and Generalists, with 52.27% of the libraries assigning "5's" to Subject Specialists, 50.00% to Generalists, and 2.27% to Online Search Specialists. In those libraries having both Subject Specialists and Generalists, the Generalist has significantly more responsibility: 49.25% of those libraries assign them "5's," as opposed to 37.31% for Subject Specialists; 8.95% rate them equally.

In only 17.04% of the libraries are paraprofessionals used at all in searching. In 1.14% paraprofessionals did most of the searching; in 1.14% they did as much as the Generalists. In 14.77% paraprofessionals received "3's" and "4's" to reflect the amount of searching they did.

BOOK SELECTION

Here respondents were asked to evaluate staff involvement in selecting for both the Reference and General Collections. Selection for the Reference Collection was primarily the responsibility of Generalists, with 59.10% of the respondents assigning "5's" to them, 44.32% to Subject Specialists, 4.54% to Collection Development Officer/Acquisitions Librarians, and 1.14% to a Special Committee of Generalists and Subject Specialists. Of the 67 libraries having both Subject Specialists and Generalists, only 25.37% of them gave Subject Specialists more responsibility for reference selection than Generalists.

As one might expect, Subject Specialists had the primary responsibility for building the General Collection. 63.64% of the libraries gave "5's" to their Subject Specialists, 23.86% to their Collection Development Officer/ Acquisitions Librarians, and 21.59% to the faculty. However, in 21.05% of the cases where "5's" were given to the faculty, the same score was also given to Subject Specialists or Collection Development Officer/Acquisitions Librarians.

REFERENCE SERVICE

Of the 15,927.3 total reference hours for all ARL libraries, 38.40% of those hours were apportioned to Generalists, 31.06% to Subject Specialists, 14.09% to paraprofessionals, 16.04% to student assistants (including library school interns, who accounted for 2.4% of that figure), 0.25% to Graduate Fellows, and 0.16% to what one library termed Department Heads and Functional Area Coordinators.[2] (see Figure 1)

Very few libraries had only Generalists on the desk. 65.91% had Subject Specialists (this figure includes Subject Specialists assigned to Reference Departments), 59.10% had paraprofessionals, and 47.73% used student assistants, of whom 16.67% were library school interns (the 16.67% figure may actually be higher, since "library school intern" was not a selectable category but was added by some respondents). Of those libraries having both Subject Specialists and Generalists, 64.18% reported using Subject Specialists on the desk.

When comparing professional to paraprofessional contributions at the reference desk, it appears that professionals clearly assume the bulk of reference hours. At 5.69% of the libraries, paraprofessionals were on the desk more hours than professionals, and at only 1.14% of the libraries were student assistants on more hours than professionals. At 13.64% of the libraries, paraprofessionals and student assistants were on more hours than professionals.

When asked whether paraprofessionals were required to have at least a B.A. or B.S. degree, 61.54% of the 52 libraries that used paraprofessionals said "yes," or said that even though it is not a formal requirement, none would be hired without an undergraduate degree.

Librarians were also asked to make a subjective judgment on the minimum, maximum, and optimum number of hours that a staff member should spend on the desk. As several respondents adroitly pointed out, that decision fluctuates with changes in user traffic patterns: during slow periods, more hours can be accomodated; in heavy use periods (e.g., finals), desk burnout occurs more frequently. With that qualification, the mean figure they gave for each category was: minimum number of hours, 10; maximum, 20.43; optimum, 14.64.

Two reference questions had to be eliminated from analysis. One asked for the number of people assigned to each staff group but failed to specify that computations should be based on FTE staff. The other question attempted to determine whether libraries have made decisions in the last five years to remove Subject Specialists from the reference desk, but the question was poorly worded and misunderstood by respondents.

CONCLUSION

The basic question addressed in this study was who is responsible for providing basic public services in ARL libraries. To what extent are staff members utilized in online searching, library instruction, book selection, and reference service?

Most libraries employ Subject Specialists on the reference desk, and it is Subject Specialists who provide the bulk of graduate library instruction, online searching, and selection for the general collection. In the area of reference service and selection for the reference collection, the Generalists score higher.

However, because Subject Specialists in many libraries are actually reference librarians who also have selection responsibilities, the comparison becomes more meaningful when applied exclusively to those libraries having both Subject Specialists and Generalists. In those libraries, Generalists conduct more online searches and, surprisingly, provide almost as much graduate library instruction as do Subject Specialists.

Although the majority of libraries use paraprofessionals on the desk, they actually contribute fewer hours (in the total sample) than do student assistants. Paraprofessionals are probably used more extensively in undergraduate library instruction, but only 10.23% of the libraries report using them on the graduate level, and no more than 17.04% use them for online searches.

The question of who is primarily responsible for building the General Collection--faculty or librarians--has a clear answer. In only 15.91% of the libraries were faculty more active than librarians.

% EACH STAFF GROUP CONTRIBUTES TO TOTAL REFERENCE DESK HOURS

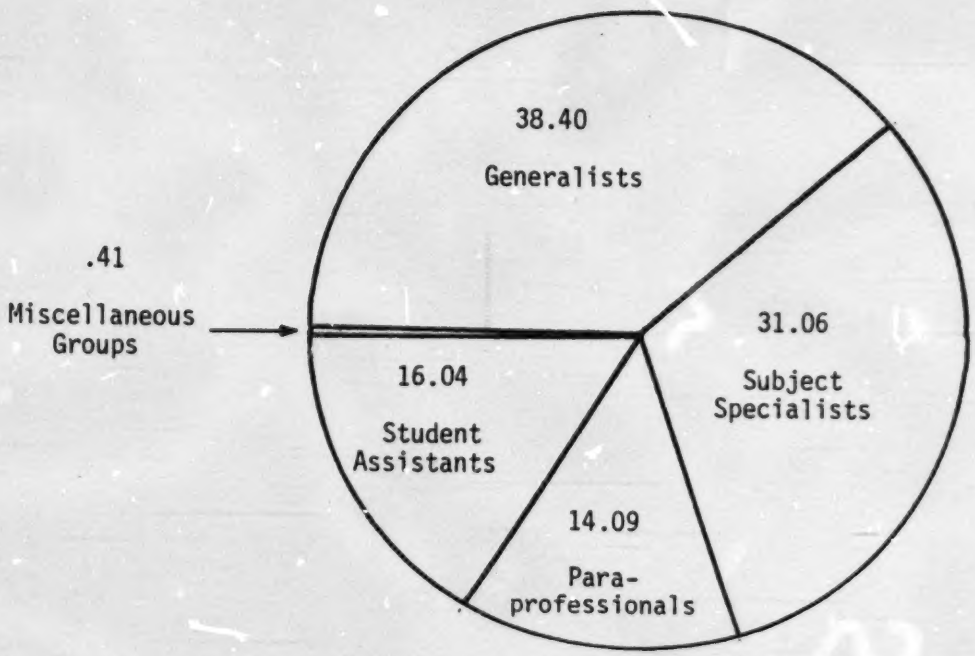

Figure I

LIBRARIES HAVING BOTH SUBJECT SPECIALISTS AND GENERALISTS

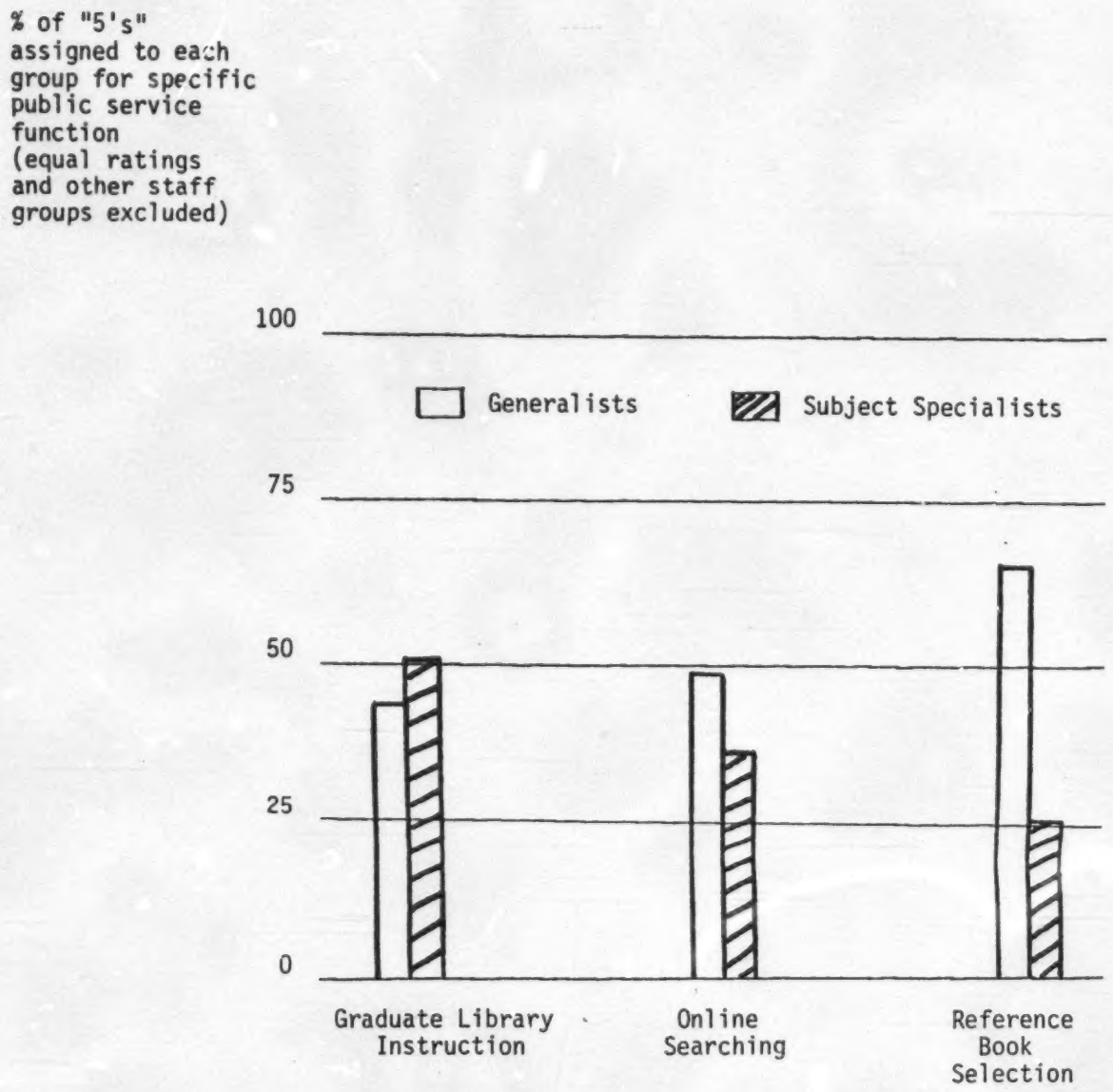

Figure II

FOOTNOTES

[1] When group percentages are added for specific public services, totals will exceed 100%. This is due to some respondents assigning the same weight to two or more groups.

[2] Although combined case data is useful in gauging the overall commitment of time for each group, another computation, based on the mean percent of time each group contributes within its own library, is equally germane. Those figures are: Generalists, 54.06% (n=74); Subject Specialists, 46.38% (n=58); Paraprofessionals, 23.74% (n=52); Student Assistants, 20.39% (n=42).

REFERENCE STAFF QUESTIONNAIRE

Note: this questionnaire should be filled out by the Head of the Reference Dept. at the Main (not undergraduate or branch) library; only personnel primarily assigned to the Main library should be counted. For the purposes of this questionnaire, the following definitions are operational:

Generalist Reference Librarian--a librarian whose prime responsibility is to staff the Reference Desk and who does not select materials for the general (non-reference) collection.

Subject Specialist Librarian--a librarian who selects materials in one or more specific subject area (e.g., English, Psychology, Chemistry) for the general (non-reference) collection.

Paraprofessional--a staff member employed full time and who works on the Reference Desk.

Student Assistant--a student employed part time and who assists at the Reference Desk.

Faculty--anyone who teaches at the university, with the rank of instructor or above, and is not on the staff of the library.

For those libraries that have both Information Desks (where only directional or basic information questions are answered, such as "What are your hours?" or "How do I find a book with this title in the library?) and Reference Desks, include data only for the Reference Desk.

1. How many people does the library employ on the Reference Desk for each group:

_____ Generalist Reference Librarians

_____ Subject Specialist Librarians

_____ Paraprofessionals

_____ Student Assistants

2. What is the total number of hours staff work on the desk, in an average week, for each goup:

_____ Generalist Reference Librarians

_____ Subject Specialist Librarians

_____ Paraprofessionals

_____ Student Assistants

3. If your library does use paraprofessionals on the desk, are they required to have at least a B.A. or B.S. degree?

_____ yes _____ no

4. If your library does have subject specialists librarians but they are not employed at the Reference Desk, was there a time within the last 5 years in which they did work at the Reference Desk (and were subject specialists at the time)?

_____ yes _____ no

5. Please indicate who does the most online literature searching in your library (place a number by each category; 5=highest amount of searches, 1=lowest amount of searches. Leave blank those categories not involved in searching)

_____ Generalist Reference Librarians

_____ Subject Specialist Librarians

_____ Paraprofessionals

_____ Student Assistants

_____ Other (please specify)

6. Which group provides the most library instruction at an undergraduate level (place a number by each group; 5=highest, 1=lowest. Leave blank those groups not involved in instruction):

_____ Generalist Reference Librarians

_____ Subject Specialist Librarians

_____ Professionals

_____ Student Assistants

_____ Other (please specify)

7. Which group provides the most library instruction at a graduate level (place a number by each group; 5=highest, 1=lowest. Leave blank those groups not involved in instruction):

_____ Generalist Reference Librarians

_____ Subject Specialist Librarians

_____ Paraprofessionals

_____ Student Assistants

_____ Other (please specify)

8. Which of the following groups is most active in the selection of materials for the Reference collection (place a number by each group; 5=highest, 1=lowest. Leave blank those groups not involved in Reference selection):

_____ Generalist Reference Librarians

_____ Subject Specialist Librarians

_____ Collection Development Officer or Acquisitions Librarian

_____ Faculty

_____ Other (please specify)

9. Which of the following groups is most active in the selection of materials for the collection as a whole, excluding reference (place a number by each group; 5=highest, 1=lowest. Leave blank those groups not involved in selection):

_____ Subject Specialist Librarians

_____ Collection Development Officer or Acquisitions Librarian

_____ Faculty

_____ Other (please specify)

10. What is the minimum amount of time you think a staff member needs to spend on the Reference Desk per week to maintain their reference skills?

_____ hours

11. What is the maximum amount of time a staff member should spend per week on the Reference Desk, beyond which time burn-out or inefficiency would occur?

_____ hours

12. What are the optimum number of hours per week you think a staff member should work on the Reference Desk?

_____ hours